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Economic and Social Council

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6 and 7 May 1999
Agenda item 2
Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters

Humanitarian affairs segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council

Note by the Secretariat

1. The Economic and Social Council, in its agreed conclusions 1998/1,[1] adopted at the humanitarian affairs segment of its substantive session of 1998, requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with Governments, to recommend to the Council, at its organizational session, ways in which the humanitarian segment might be enhanced so as to strengthen the role of the Council as regards the coordination and policy guidance of the United Nations system humanitarian activities.

2. In pursuance of this request, a note verbale, dated 15 March 1999, was sent to Member States and observer missions, requesting their comments and suggestions. Responses were received from the delegations of Brazil, Canada, Chile, Guyana (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the Group of 77 and China), Germany (on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations that are members of the European Union), Switzerland and the United States of America.

Organization of the humanitarian segment

3. Delegations underlined that the humanitarian segment was an important innovation for strengthening the Economic and Social Council's role in coordination and policy guidance to humanitarian activities and that its utility should be optimized.

4. The segment should remain a key forum for high-level policy discussion on thematic issues such as: the enhancement of the role of the Economic and Social Council; the transition from relief to rehabilitation and development; assessment and evaluation of humanitarian activities; emergency response to natural disasters; coordination of humanitarian activities in complex emergencies and post-conflict situations; and the safety and security of humanitarian personnel. It was further recommended that themes should be agreed well in advance to allow for thorough preparation both by the Secretariat and by

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the delegations. It was also underlined that timely and analytical reports from the Secretariat would contribute in no small way to the quality of the Council's deliberations.

5. It was emphasized that the segment should strengthen the Economic and Social Council's capacity to review activities in the field, particularly in regard to coordination by United Nations agencies. This should enable the Council to better assess and evaluate the conduct of humanitarian activities and promote greater accountability in that regard. The segment should also enhance the Council's capacity to provide guidance to future activities.

6. More specifically with regard to the organization of the humanitarian segment of the Economic and Social Council, several delegations suggested that the segment should start with panel discussions, each with a limited number of speakers. The names of the panellists as well as the topics of their presentation should be made known well in advance so as to allow the delegations time to better prepare for the dialogue. Delegations would have the opportunity to react to statements made during the panel sessions, posing questions to the panellists as well as commenting on relevant sections of the Secretary-General's report.

7. It was suggested that the panel discussions be followed by a general discussion, in which delegations could focus their statements on issues arising from the panel discussions as well as the report of the Secretary-General. The agreed conclusions of the segment should be concrete and action-oriented.

8. With regard to the panel discussions, it was suggested that there should be two separate panels, with the participation of resident and/or humanitarian coordinators, addressing natural disasters and complex emergencies separately. The panel dealing with natural disasters should include discussion on lessons learned from Hurricane Mitch. It was also suggested that a third panel with selected executive heads of Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agencies should focus on addressing the theme of the session,[2] namely "International cooperation and coordinated responses to the humanitarian emergencies, in particular in the transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development". A few delegations made reference to the Brookings Round Table on the Gap between Relief and Long-term Development, suggesting that the Economic and Social Council should be informed on this process.

9. Taking into account the above-mentioned suggestions, the Economic and Social Council may wish to consider the following arrangement for the 1999 humanitarian segment:

Day 1

Afternoon session	Panel discussion on natural disasters
	Panel discussion on complex emergencies

(Each panel, of one-and-a-half hours' duration, will be composed of three speakers selected among resident and/or humanitarian coordinators of affected countries. Delegations will have the opportunity to comment on statements made during the panel sessions and pose questions to the panellists.)

Day 2

Morning session	Panel discussion, with selected executive heads of the IASC agencies, on the theme of the segment
Afternoon session	General discussion with statements by Member States

Day 3

Morning session	Continuation and conclusion of the general discussion
Afternoon[3]	Adoption of the agreed conclusions

Enhanced consideration on the part of the Economic and Social Council of the response of the United Nations to natural disasters and complex emergencies

10. In addition to specific suggestions on the organization of the humanitarian segment, the Group of 77 and China also commented on the broader question of how the Economic and Social Council could further strengthen its coordination and policy guidance role in the humanitarian field. In this context, the following elements were suggested for further consideration:

- Holding additional meetings of the Economic and Social Council, preferably at a time proximate to the occurrence of major humanitarian crises, with a view to achieving a more timely exchange of information between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the members of the Council, strengthening intergovernmental oversight of the consolidated appeals process and permitting closer monitoring of development and lessons learned;
- Clarifying the division of labour, and cooperation, between and among the bodies mandated by the Charter of the United Nations on humanitarian matters;
- Promoting capacity-building for response to humanitarian emergencies, especially in countries particularly prone to natural disasters;
- Considering the possibility of a more formal arrangement for Economic and Social Council oversight of humanitarian activities in the future, including a possible role for the Council in relation to consolidated appeals (presentation, assessment, lessons learned) and the elaboration of long-term strategies for the transition from relief to rehabilitation and development.

11. The Economic and Social Council may wish to consider the above-mentioned suggestions in the broader context of the strengthening of the role of the Council. In so doing, the Council should take fully into account that the United Nations and its humanitarian organizations have a standing mandate, provided by the Charter of the United Nations and relevant intergovernmental decisions, to respond to natural disasters and other emergencies as and when they occur. It has also long been established that such responses must be provided in accordance with a number of basic principles, including, in particular, the guiding principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/53/3), chap. VII, para. 5.

[2] See Economic and Social Council decision 1998/208 of 5 February 1999.

[3] While the Economic and Social Council could proceed with the consideration of other items in its agenda in the formal meeting, time should be set aside at the end of the meeting for the adoption of the agreed conclusions.